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# Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order

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# Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order

**Abstract**
This is a book review of Elijah Siegler, ed., *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016.

**Author Notes**
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Elijah Siegler, ed. *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016.

"Scholars of religion," writes Elijah Siegler, editor of *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, "do their best work when their analysis reaches beyond sincere beliefs to include arguments, performances, tricks, lies, or games" (8). Such a statement, which appears in the volume's introductory chapter, could very well be read as the book's *raison d'être*. After all, the Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, are cinematic jesters, crafting their screen stories using sleight of hand and with tongue in cheek. But followers of their work inevitably wonder if there is in fact something of substance beneath the playful, ironic surface—something sincere, perhaps even religious. Enter *Coen*, a work that sets out in search of the Coens' cinematic soul and returns with a raft of compelling insights, albeit with a heavy dose of ambivalence about the religiosity of their films.

This is not virgin territory. Cathleen Falsani's *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* mined a similar vein, exploring the religious dimension of the Coens' body of work up to their 2009 release, *A Serious Man*.[1] Unlike Falsani's work, *Coen* is an anthology, each chapter penned by a different author, mostly scholars of American religious history. Each essay tackles an individual Coen brothers film (except the chapter that considers *The Ladykillers* and *Intolerable Cruelty* together) and falls in chronological order (except the chapters on *Burn After Reading* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which are

shuffled around to better fit the book's thematic arrangement). The chapters are grouped into three sections (or "acts") according to the prevailing sensibility of that period in the Coens' career; the first section focuses on their early films, which are the least obviously religious and thus require the most creative license in how they are engaged religiously; the second section looks at their middle period, analyzing religion in relation to some other facet of contemporary life and society; and the third section looks at their later films (so far), comprised of their most overtly religious and theological films. Between each section is a bridging essay (or "intermission") that focuses on a transitional film in the Coen body of work (namely, *Fargo* and *No Country for Old Men*) and offers reflections that might serve as tools for interacting with the rest of the Coens' output more generally. Every title in their oeuvre is covered up to *Inside Llewyn Davis*, with a concluding chapter that looks forward to then-unreleased *Hail, Caesar!* So, as you can see, it is current.

Methodologically, the collection is eclectic. Contributors are given a long leash, free to work with varying definitions of religion and divergent approaches. Siegler identifies three methods operative in the book: (1) "religion in film," in which religious content is examined; (2) "religion through film," in which deeply embedded metaphysical and theological themes are sought; and (3) "film as religion," in which the audience's religious usage of their films is explored. That all three types find a place here is, to my mind, a real strength. It more closely

resembles the holistic manner in which lay viewers ordinarily interact with films than a methodologically uniform approach would have. Erica Hurwitz Andrus's chapter on *The Big Lebowski*, for example, takes the "film as religion" approach, examining "Dudeism," a new religious movement that takes the cult classic as its "sacred text." By shining a light on this community, it offers insight into wider religious trends. As such, it stands out as a highlight of the volume.

The style matches the subject matter: erudite, yet informal, even witty. This is high-brow scholarship with middle-brow taste, standing at the nexus of the academic and the popular—much like the Coen brothers themselves, the quintessential accessible auteurs, managing the difficult task of being both intelligent and unpretentious. I suppose it would be unwise to be entirely straight-faced about films where an exquisite rendition of a hymn serves as the musical setting for a comic baptism scene (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) or where the villains are known as a band of nihilists (*The Big Lebowski*). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that this is not a serious academic work. On the contrary, as we noted above, these thinkers simply recognize that a certain degree of playfulness is not inimical to scholarly insight. And insights abound. Let me highlight just two, fairly arbitrarily chosen. Finnbar Curtis sees *Burn After Reading* as an illustration of "political theology," which is not theology in the ordinary sense, but rather the way in which the modern state claims for itself exceptional, Godlike authority. Ellen Posman finds that the Capra-esque *The Hudsucker Proxy* differs from the

films of Frank Capra himself insofar as they advocate a privatized spirituality reflective of the times, rather than the more communal orientation of Capra's work. I found these points genuinely illuminating, not only of the films themselves but of contemporary culture at large, yet they are gleaned from ostensibly lighthearted entertainment.

The quality of the essays is consistently high, which is, of course, a credit to the contributors, who all apply a keen scholarly eye to their assigned films, unearthing interesting and insightful points. Care is taken to ensure that Christianity is not unduly imposed upon the Coens' work, and so a number of religious traditions find a voice here too: yes, Christianity (e.g., in the chapters on *True Grit*, *The Ladykillers)*, but also Judaism (e.g., *A Serious Man*, *Barton Fink*), and even Buddhism (e.g., *The Hudsucker Proxy*). Michael J. Altman notes how, for many viewers, *True Grit* is considered "religious," while *A Serious Man* is merely "Jewish": "*True Grit* is rendered the most obviously religious film of the Coens because it is also the most Protestant" (234). Viewing through a Protestant lens by default is a tendency the *Coen* writers are sensitive to and eager to avoid.

The essays are often at their best when they venture out beyond their assigned film and explore the wider Coen *oeuvre*, drawing connections between films and identifying recurring themes. Similarly, I suspect part of what makes David Feltmate's chapter particularly strong is that it examines two films together (*The Ladykillers* and *Intolerable Cruelty*), rather than just one. This leads me to

wonder if the work might have been improved had each chapter tackled a key theme or aspect of the Coens' output, rather than dedicating each chapter to a single film (see below for thoughts to the contrary). It might also have been improved if contributors more frequently rounded out their interpretations with formal analysis. This happens occasionally, most notably in M. Gail Hamner's chapter on *No Country For Old Men*, which explores the way "light—sunlight and the color of sunlight—registers that sacrality [of Cormac McCarthy's novel]" (178). That this approach yielded insights that discursive analysis alone could not makes me wish that attention to formal qualities comprised a larger proportion of the book. Hamner's two chapters are among the best for precisely this reason.

One theme that emerges is how difficult the Coens are to pigeonhole, regularly confronting us with a number of ambiguities. Are these films religious or materialist? Morality tales or amoral irony? Contemptible portrayals or sympathetic characters? Heisenbergian or Schrödingerian? The siblings consistently defy attempts to fit them neatly into our preferred dichotomies. Siegler notes at the outset the tendency for commentators to do exactly that, either treating their work as unambiguous reflections of a so-called biblical worldview or writing their work off as nothing more than empty postmodern formalism. This book refuses to do that; instead, the ambiguities are taken seriously, and the Coens are not shoehorned into tidy categories that do not easily fit. This is where the book's one-film-per-chapter

is a plus, and perhaps better serves its aims, because we are forced to do business with the Coens' entire output and not allow selective viewing to distort the data.

In answer to the question of whether or not they are moralists, the recurring answer seems to be: it's complicated. Nevertheless, the fragile consensus that emerges is that there *is* indeed moral substance here but that it is complex. Richard Amesbury puts it best when he says that understanding *Fargo* as fiction in the tradition of Flannery O'Connor's "grotesque" gives us "a way of interpreting these elements that is not moralistic, but which is nevertheless in service of a moral vision" (104). The question of their religiosity is even less clear-cut. In his epilogue, Siegler wonders if religious engagement with the Coen brothers' films might in fact be a wild-goose chase after all. He quotes fellow contributor Curtis in saying that, rather than using the "religion" label to imbue their analysis with a sense of gravity, "we might look to the lessons that 'might be drawn from attention to the quotidian, ordinary qualities of life that so obsess the Coen brothers'" (274). Personally—and this is where my bias as a theologian shows—I am less interested in parsing definitions to determine what does and does not qualify as religious than I am in understanding all facets of life, quotidian or otherwise, through a particular religious lens. So, for me, the very fact that the Coens' body of work reliably provokes questions of morality and religion—even if variously interpreted—is compelling evidence that there *is* something meaningful there, even if that element is maddeningly (or gloriously) difficult to pin down, dissect, and label.

Kudos to the project's mastermind(s) for the stellar choice of filmmakers. Entertaining and enigmatic, enthralling and elusive—Coen films are the ideal subjects for indepth, scholarly analysis. Moreover, they frequently and inevitably prompt discussion about morality, brutality, and the banality of evil. I have had conversations with friends who would not count themselves as cineastes in which these issues have arisen quite naturally after viewing a Coen film. So one of this collection's strengths is simply that it exists, a recognition both of the popularity of the Coen brothers and their reach, but especially of the *je ne sais quoi* of their work that elicits this sort of discussion, even in movie theatres, cafés, and living rooms. Perhaps it has something to do with their characters, who are reliably morally flawed, to put it mildly. "Most people, according to the Coens," writes Siegler, "are motivated by greed and self-interest to perform evil acts" (13). Similarly, Jason C. Bivens says succinctly, "The knowledge of our sheer averageness fuels all Coen films" (269). Whatever it is, the Coens apparently have their finger on the pulse of some important element of the *zeitgeist*, and, as such, *Coen* would serve well as a text for a religion and film class, not least because it uses films with which students will often be familiar and like. Scholars of religion and film are likewise bound to find it useful, since the popularity of the Coen brothers suggests that their work might prove particularly fruitful in seeking to understand contemporary American culture. That this work is comprehensive in its scope will also be appreciated by

researchers looking to delve into particular Coen films, especially those that might typically be overlooked.

As noted in the book's introduction, the Coens' work has become more obviously religious as their career has progressed, a fact reasserted in the concluding chapter, which is a summary reflection vaguely based on *Hail, Caesar!*, unreleased at the time of publication. That this film turned out to be among the Coens' most explicitly religious, insofar as it explores the religious possibilities of cinema during Hollywood's studio era (the film-within-the-film is the archetypal religious epic critiqued by Paul Schrader's transcendental style: "Squint at the grandeur!," barks a director while shooting a theophany; "Divine presence to be shot," reads an intertitle in the rough cut of a biblical blockbuster) suggests that—maybe, just maybe—the most substantially religious films from the sibling auteurs may yet lie ahead. In the meantime, this anthology serves as a comprehensive and illuminating exploration of the output, to date, of one of the most consistently fascinating filmmaking collaborations of our time.

[1] Cathleen Falsani, *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009).